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- a) Briefly summarize the YAL book that serves as the anchor text for the chapter.

A Lesson Before Dying, by Ernest Gaines, takes place in the rural south of the 1940s. It tells the story of Jefferson, an uneducated black man who has spent most of his life working on a plantation for low wages. When Jefferson finds himself in the wrong place at the wrong time - he's in a liquor store when three men are killed in a gunfight - he's wrongly convicted of murder. Jefferson's lawyer defends him by arguing he's no more intelligent than a hog, and therefore incapable of committing such a crime. But the jury convicts Jefferson anyway, and worse yet, Jefferson takes his lawyer's words to heart, believing he's no better than an animal.

Miss Emma, Jefferson's godmother, refuses to let him die without dignity. She solicits the help of a local school teacher, Grant Wiggins, to help prepare Jefferson for death. At first Grant is reluctant, and his initial conversations with Jefferson prove futile. But he eventually persuades Jefferson to write down his thoughts, and in the conversations that follow, convinces him that he has become a symbol for the black community, and that the way in which he dies, matters. By the time execution day arrives, Grant has grown fond of Jefferson, and is unable to attend the event. He asks his school children to kneel in honor of Jefferson as the execution takes place; eventually, a townspeople arrives to announce that the execution is over and tell Grant that Jefferson was the bravest man in the room. Grant goes back inside his classroom, faces the children, and weeps.

- b) Summary of chapter: "Black Aesthetics: Signifyin(g) in a *Lesson Before Dying*"

The chapter opens with a brief sketch of the history of black literary theory, which developed in the early 1960s largely in reaction to formalists' emphasis on the text and universal meaning. Early black literary theorists argued that "black art was directly related to black life. It imitated it" (139), and therefore, the text could only be understood in a historical and social context. Furthermore, theorists argued, readers must acknowledge blackness itself as a social construction, and understand the dual identity, the "double-consciousness," the twoness - as described by W.E.B. DuBois - that characterizes the black American lived experience.

Moore (1997) continues the chapter by framing the discussion of black literary theory around Henry Louis Gates' essay "Criticism in the Jungle," and more specifically, Gates' contention that the black text itself is two-toned or double-voiced, both white and black, standard and vernacular, of the Western/American literary tradition and apart from it. As such, Gates' argues, the most important task in reading black literature is understanding the way in which blackness is signified. He defines signification as "the ability to say one thing and mean another," and claims it is "the blackest aspect of the black [literary] tradition" (144). Moore

(1997) then uses the concept of signifying to interpret and analyze Gaines' *Lesson Before Dying*.

Moore first discusses signifyin(g) rhetoric in his analysis of the text. He argues that the image of the hog in the novel signifies on the sonnet "If We Must Die" by Claude McKay, noting that "the poem juxtaposes the two contrary images that characterize Jefferson in the novel--a hog and a man--animal and human" (145). Moore next discusses signifyin(g) through Miss Emma's speech toward Grant about visiting Jefferson. There in the kitchen she utters, "He don't have to do it," though Grant realizes through those words that he actually does have to do what she is asking. Moore points out that this is a prime example of signifyin(g) since it "includes 'the ability to say one thing and mean another'" (Gates 1971, 6, qtd. In Moore 1997, 146). Miss Emma's and Tante Lou's body language also signify in this conversation, conveying meaning through the way they maintain their firm stance before Grant and glare at him. In another example of signifyin(g) rhetoric Miss Emma states, "You the teacher," intending much more with her statement than the literal meaning of the words. She is not just stating an obvious fact but is conveying to Grant his responsibility, as a teacher and leader in their community, to visit Jefferson.

Moore also identifies how text structure can signify when reading and analyzing African-American literature. He notes, "In the African American tradition, Gates explains, authors often revise at least two earlier texts, usually from different literary periods or from other generations" (148). For example, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Moore notes that the text signifies on spirituals. One spiritual Moore mentions is "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?", noting the echoes of this song in the first line of the novel: "I was not there, yet I was there." There are multiple examples of signifyin(g) on spirituals throughout the novel. The text also signifies on the slave narrative through the incorporation of Jefferson's notebook. Moore explains, "Language has been a tool of liberation for Grant; and with the notebook, he offers Jefferson language as a tool of self-discovery and salvation" (151). He goes on to say that through this notebook, Jefferson achieves the same result as those writing slave narratives in the preceding century: "He literally writes himself into being as a man" (151). Through the tool of the notebook, Jefferson is able to reject the identity of a hog that was assigned to him and claim his own identity as a man, thus freeing himself (despite his physical bondage and execution).

In the final section of the chapter, "Joining the Conversation," Moore provides several additional texts for exploration. He mentions "The Young Reverend Zelma Lee Moses," a short story by Joyce Carol Thomas, that signifies on the African American folktale "The People Could Fly" (155-156). Moore argues that texts such as *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1977) by Mildred Taylor and *The Moves Make the Man* (1984) by Bruce Brooks are helpful for introducing students to the African-American tradition. Finally, he names other texts as "opportunities for exploring the sociohistorical contexts" and "emphasiz[ing] the importance of the African American vernacular" (158).

c) Generate at least 3-5 takeaways from the chapter in terms of thinking about how you (and others) might integrate literary theory into the teaching of YAL based on how you experienced your reading of the chapter.

- The chapter paid close attention to black figurative language and narrative forms to highlight the intertextuality in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Thinking about the idea of dual identity and “double-consciousness” from DuBois, let’s consider another theoretical approach- multiliteracies. Jefferson’s diary is a compelling language tool, a mutual catalyst of Grant’s unshackling and Jefferson’s redemption. His entries are rich with reflections and black vernacular, and while this idea doesn’t fit into a specific YAL framework, analyzing rap lyrics (from the 90s and 2000s, more prolific/socially-conscious artists) and/or notable negro spiritual lyrics to underscore linguistic diversity, figuration, and the “two-toned or double-faced” nature of black lyrics. How is a particular rap verse/spiritual signify blackness? How are the explicit and implicit signs in the verse connected to the author’s consciousness, worldview, struggles, etc.? What literary theory (or theories) can a student apply to a particular verse and defend? Hinting to Gates’ earlier prism metaphor.
- The juxtaposition of Grant and Jefferson. The scene between Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Grant. The diary. The last scene between Paul and Grant. The chapter did a superb and impressionable job taking powerful scenes and drawing interesting equivalencies- two characters walking two different paths in life, circumstances bring them together and change their lives for the better. Approaching YAL with a New Critics/reader-response approach, the same close reading and surgical analysis can be applied. Allow students to jot down meaningful quotes, objects, ideas, scenes, pages, etc. as they read. At a stopping point, allow them to unpack the reasons why their selections stood out. What makes this particular scene/dialogue/quote significant in your eyes?
- Another takeaway is the guiding questions in the beginning of the chapter and the suggestion for introducing young adult readers to the African American tradition w/ Taylor’s *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, as well as Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Referring back to the guiding questions, these seem to be good openers to help students get in the mindset of critical theorists prior to reading. Developing “essential questions” will help stimulate inquiry and dialogue among students and individually. Referring back to Gates’ prism metaphor, developing good essential questions can help students approach literary theory with less apprehension.

